

Wilde accidentally smudges one of the autographed copies of *The Importance of Being Ernest*, he declares, "As I have initiated the smudge, it must count as a *reparque*. You might ask one and sixpence extra for that copy." (In 1981 the smudged copy was to fetch \$8,500 at auction.)

Still, for all their good humor, these last letters are saddening. The man who was generous enough to pay half the £200 fine incurred by an obscure anarchist poet ("Whatever I did was merely what you would have done for me...") was obliged to panhandle relative strangers for 50 francs. His own generosity—and recklessness—continued unabated. When in 1898 Wilfred Hugh Chesson mentioned Emile Verhaeren to him, Wilde exclaimed, "Oh! now you mention the greatest living poet." And well he might praise the Belgian who wrote that "to live is to take

and give with joy," and also, "*Il faut aimer pour découvrir avec génie*." Certainly Wilde had given gladly and was taking equally gladly now that he was, in his own words, dying as he had lived: beyond his means. But he had also loved intensely enough to discover with genius. He indignantly responded to Chesson's attempt to console him with "the life of the spirit": "There is no hell but this: a body without a soul, or a soul without a body." It is right that he died before he was quite reduced to either alternative—before we could have applied to him what he said of one of his revered masters: "Poor dear Pater has lived to disprove everything he has written."

JOHN SIMON

John Simon is a drama critic for *New York* magazine and a film critic for *National Review*.

mediately to define the core of his message. Such an effort at reconstructing Jesus' message leads to a scholarly dependence on "pleasant theological abstractions": thus, Jesus preached that God was a loving and merciful Father who forgave sinners and preferred mercy to sacrifice. He thereby astounded and offended his listeners, who rejected him and his message, and ultimately plotted his death through the agency of Rome.

The problem with this reconstruction, Sanders observes, is that it does not work. Such a message in the context of first-century Judaism would hardly have come as news to Jesus' audience. By that time the Jews as a people had already been composing and preserving scriptures and creating liturgies embodying their faith in such a God for almost a millennium. Nor does it seem credible that Jews in general or Pharisees in particular would have been so affronted by someone preaching that message that they would feel compelled to kill him. On the contrary, "If Jesus, by eating with tax collectors [paradigmatic sinners in the Gospel accounts], led them to repent, repay those whom they had robbed, and leave off practicing their profession, he would have been a national hero."

So how does such a reconstruction come to seem historically valid? Only by creating a contrast between Jesus and his native religion. This, as Sanders exposes patiently and with acerbic intelligence, is precisely the anachronistic account developed in much New Testament scholarship, which in essence continues the hostile caricature of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries begun by the evangelists. The view that "Jesus believed in grace, he opposed the Pharisees for being legalistic and believing in merit . . . and [that] this conflict was a major cause of his execution," says Sanders,

. . . is manufactured out of whole cloth, but it seems to be the most common. It seems to arise from the following sequence: first Christianity is defined as consisting of a set of religious abstractions . . . ; then those abstractions are denied to its parent; then this supposed theological disagreement is retrojected into the life of Jesus and made the pivot on which the story turns. The view that Jesus died for grace thus ends with sheer invention about what would constitute an issue in first-century Judaism. . . . This line is basically opposed to seeing Jesus as a first-century Jew, who thought like others, spoke their language, was concerned about things which concerned them, and got into trouble over first-century is-

THE PROPHET IN HISTORY

Jesus and Judaism

by E. P. Sanders

(Fortress, 444 pp., \$19.95)

Jesus was not a Christian. Recognition of this fact—the starting point for all modern critical reconstructions of the historical Jesus—has brought with it two complications. It obscures the relation of cause (that is, Jesus) and effect (the Church), and it underscores precisely how difficult and misleading our major sources for such a reconstruction, the New Testament Gospels, really are.

The Gospels stand at too many removes, both temporal and cultural, from their ostensible subject, Jesus of Nazareth, to offer reliable evidence. Jesus preached in Aramaic to fellow Jews in the Galilee and Judaea about the coming Kingdom of God. He was executed by the Roman authorities for sedition—as were countless other Jews in this period of imperial expansion—around the year 30. But the written accounts preserved in the New Testament come from Greek-speaking, predominantly gentile communities in the Diaspora some 40 to 70 years after Jesus' crucifixion. By that time, both for religious reasons (the Christian conviction that Jesus had been raised from the dead) and political ones

(the complete degeneration of Jewish/Roman relations, which led to the bloody Jewish revolt of 66-73), much in the early tradition had been reinterpreted, not least of all the figure of Jesus himself.

Thus, while glimpses of the charismatic Jewish prophet remain, the Gospels present a different Jesus, someone who stands outside and occasionally against the institutions and traditions of Judaism; whose crucifixion marks the limits not of Rome's tolerance, but of Israel's. This Jesus, in brief, is not Jewish but Christian. Confronted by such evidence—the best he has—what is the historian to do?

Reason historically, exhorts Oxford scholar E. P. Sanders, and this—lucidly, provocatively, persuasively—is what he proceeds to do in *Jesus and Judaism*. Others before him, of course, have attempted to do just this. But Sanders, while generously praising their efforts, also astutely assesses their results, and often finds them wanting. Most studies, he remarks, begin by focusing on Jesus as preacher and teacher, and then move im-

sues. It is thus bad history. Though I am no theologian I suspect that it is bad theology.

What Sanders offers instead is good history—clearly stated hypotheses, expressed presuppositions, critically considered evidence, prudent and plausible conclusions. He proceeds by sifting through an enormous amount of material, both ancient (Josephus, Philo, Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Mishnah, and the Bible) and modern, and then applies the insights and information gleaned from this examination to the Gospels. Leading the reader step by step, he ultimately sorts his conclusions into categories. In the realm of "certain or virtually certain" deductions, he places the notion that Jesus, like many of his contemporaries, be-

lieved the current order was about to end, to be superseded by the eschatological Kingdom of God. It is "highly probable," Sanders argues, that Jesus' disciples thought of him as a king, a role he accepted, whether implicitly or explicitly; hence the strong and early tradition of the designation "messiah," though it is "probable" that Jesus did not always use the word "kingdom" with precisely the same meaning. Moreover, it is "possible" that Jesus may have conceived of the Kingdom as a present reality as well as an End-time event. Sanders rates it as "conceivable" that Jesus may have given his own death a martyrological significance. What is "incredible," however, is that Jesus was one of the rare Jews of his day who

believed in love, mercy, grace, repentance, and the forgiveness of sin; that Jews in general and Pharisees in particular would kill people who believed in such things; and that as a result of Jesus' work, Jewish confidence in election was "shaken to pieces," Judaism was "shaken to its foundations," and Judaism as a religion was destroyed—all propositions stated recently, alas, in assorted "authoritative" works. One may disagree with all or some of Sanders' conclusions. But thanks to the deliberateness and clarity of his arguments, one never wonders how he arrived at them.

A good hypothesis about the life and teachings of the historical Jesus, Sanders argues, should be able to connect the facts of Jesus' public mission, his execution, and the messianic movement that subsequently and immediately formed in his name. For Sanders, this connection is Jewish restoration theology—the belief that God would redeem exiled Israel, vanquish the unrighteous, raise the dead, and establish forever his Kingdom of peace in which even the gentiles would turn from their idolatry to worship with Israel at "the house of the God of Jacob," the renewed Temple in eschatological Jerusalem. A Jesus who preached this message, who indeed was motivated to preach by his expectation of its imminent fulfillment, would thus join company with other near-contemporary charismatics—John the Baptist, Theudas, and the "Egyptian"—who, preaching this same ostensibly religious message ("The Kingdom of God is at hand"), were persecuted by their governments as political agitators. Rome and Herod were not wrong: few Jews would distinguish between politics and religion, and the message of an impending new order at least implies a condemnation of the present one. But these charismatics—Jesus included—were wrong. Redemption as they conceived it was not at hand; the Kingdom did not arrive. Time, and Rome, continued.

WHAT SETS Jesus apart from these other prophets is thus not his message, but rather the movement that grew in the wake of his mission and that, vastly transformed, ultimately became the major cultural and religious force in the West. The Kingdom did not arrive, but the Church did. Yet even this fact, Sanders urges persuasively, attests to the Church's origins in Jewish restoration theology. For at the heart of this transformation of Jesus into Christ lay

BALLADE FOR RICHARD WILBUR

and, thereby, for the Duke of Orléans,
who offered a prize at Blois, circa 1457,
for the best ballade employing the line
"Je meurs de soif auprès de la fontaine,"
won belatedly by Richard Wilbur with his
poem with the refrain *"I die of thirst, here
at the fountain-side."*

Eagles wheel by the crags where lizards crawl,
Castalia bubbles down the mountainside,
But here, beside the darkened city-wall,
The Genius of the Fountain's dreaded bride,
Smiling, green-eyed, slim-hipped and velvet-thighed,
Spoons up from somewhere in her hidden den
The poisoned waters with which all are plied.
Je meurs de soif auprès de la fontaine.

De la fontaine . . . the phrase seems to recall
The founts where wisdom spoke to please and guide:
The antic cicada fell dumb in the fall,
The crowing fox was smitten in his pride—
Fables whose faith our novels have denied
Rhyme in inevitable French again.
Athirst for truth where morals multiplied,
Je meurs de soif auprès de La Fontaine.

Young David's meanings struck the maddened Saul
With something more than music, and he died.
Rain from the palace courtyard fills the hall,
Drips into cups where disused shadows hide . . .
Something is rotten in the countryside
Within our sorrows and beyond our ken:
Ills are a deluge, yet our wells have dried.
Je meurs de soif auprès de la fontaine.

Dick (au lieu du Duc), I have never vied
With you for any prize; yet we're tied, for when
You "die of thirst, here at the fountain-side,"
Je meurs de soif auprès de la fontaine.

JOHN HOLLANDER

the belief in his resurrection. And such a belief originates in Jewish eschatological hope, with its message of the resurrection of the dead, the vindication of the righteous, the salvation of the gentiles, and universal redemption. The historian need not posit a Christian Jesus, in other words, to account for the Christian Church. A Jewish Jesus, with Jewish followers who looked forward to the fulfillment of the promise of redemption in their days, both suffices as an explanation and fits with what else we know about Jesus' historical context.

Sanders's economical and simple construction of such a Jesus, in a field where historical evidence is so often subordinated to religious conviction, is a victory for common sense. The prejudicial power of feminism, Marxism, or Whiggery in the writing of history pales in comparison to the orthodoxy that encrusts so much New Testament scholarship—an orthodoxy, indeed the Orthodoxy, that formed the very identity of Christendom and, subsequently, of European civilization.

By his salubrious unorthodoxy and meticulous scholarship, Sanders brings together in *Jesus and Judaism*, as he did in his earlier path-breaking work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), the two golden traditions of this century's New Testament study represented by Albert Schweitzer (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*) and George Foot Moore (*Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*). Like Schweitzer, Sanders takes seriously the proposition that Jesus was an apocalyptic preacher. Like Moore (and too few New Testament scholars), he can command the Semitic sources as well as the Greek, the better to explore Jesus' native religious context.

Jesus and Judaism is a milestone study, which like all such works marks off both the distance traveled by earlier scholars and the beginning of the next stage. For, as Sanders both argues and demonstrates, theological orthodoxy, that great aid to the formation of cultural identity, has controlled far too much of what passes for historical scholarship. It is time for historians of the New Testament to rise up, awaken from their dogmatic slumbers, and really do history.

PAULA FREDRIKSEN

Paula Fredriksen teaches history of religions at the University of California at Berkeley. Her study *Jesus of Nazareth and the Christs of the Churches* will appear this fall from Editions du Cerf.

CORRESPONDENCE, from page 6

but more for their shock value—more for the terror an attack on such a target would produce. As Paul Nitze recently stated when discussing the use of the atomic bomb on Japan, the "psychological impact of the weapons were far greater than their military consequences." The concept of deterrence in a nuclear age is an extension of this line of thinking and a deterrent is credible only if the outcome of a nuclear exchange would be so cataclysmic as to preclude first use. The fear of such an outcome can be generated only if cities are targeted and innocents placed in jeopardy of annihilation. Placing innocents in such a position may call into question the entire concept of a deterrence that is both workable and moral.

ROBERT L. DI VIZIO
Detroit, Michigan

DIFFERENT 'DRUMMER'

To the editors:

You can put this one in the department of "missed the book; saw the movie." In your May 12 Notebook there was a tidy paragraph titled "Farewell, My Lovely," which amazed me for its inaccuracy. The writer claimed that Charlie in John le Carré's book *The Little Drummer Girl* was an American, that the villain of the book was the Israeli, Kurtz, and that the callousness of all other Israeli characters horrified readers. In fact, Charlie was British, Kurtz was fatherly, and le Carré's sympathetic treatment of the other Israeli characters makes your writer's assertion ridiculous.

TOM FUDGE
St. Paul, Minnesota

POPPED PREDICTION

To the editors:

TRB's recent prediction—"Sometime soon, an influential conservative journal like *Commentary* . . . is going to publish an article titled something like 'What's Wrong with Nuclear Superiority?' [and] . . . someone is going to lose his 'pas devant les enfants' scruples and say it outright" ("Nuclear Superiority," May 12)—comes a bit late. In the March 1983 issue of *Commentary*, Robert Jastrow, a previously unrenowned professor at Dartmouth and now a cheerleader for the administration's Star Wars program, made his debut onto the public stage with "Why Strategic Superiority Matters." He concluded, "And so we finally see why strategic superiority matters. We see how it is that . . . he who can blow the world up three times has more power than he who can blow it up only once."

Most perceptive critics panned his performance.

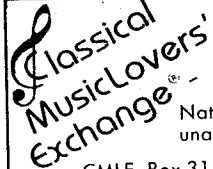
E. COREY ROBIN
Princeton, New Jersey

COMRADES FOR SDI?

To the editors:

Regarding "Madder than MAD" by Leon Wieseltier (May 12): If many liberals and intellectuals (or are they interchangeable in your lexicon?) are so positive that the Strategic Defense Initiative will not work and will be a colossal waste of our nation's resources, why do the Russians so vehemently oppose it? One would think they would sit back and chortle with glee at the prospects of our spending ourselves into oblivion chasing an unattainable will-o'-the-wisp. Can it be that Gorbachev is as featherheaded as THE NEW REPUBLIC makes our president out to be, or does he know from Russia's considerable research that SDI is a viable concept?

E. A. RIST
Dundee, Florida



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